

THIRD PRIZE STORY.

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MARGUERITE'S TRAMP.

BY MISS CARRIE CRADLOCK (15 YEARS OLD.)

CHAPTER I—THE CHRISTMAS PARTY.

"Within the hall are song and laughter,
The cheeks of Christmas glow red and jolly,
And sprouting is every corbel and rafter
With lightsome green of ivy and holly."

It was a clear, cold December night. Jolly old Christmas could not have chosen more perfect weather for his festivities. The leafless trees were decked in the purest of ermine and the rays of moonlight falling upon the snowdrifts here and there, caused them to flash like a thousand diamonds. The streets were almost deserted, but every now and then might be seen a party of merry lads and lassies, hastening toward the home of some friend or relative. What cared they if the keen, biting frost brought a ruddy glow to their cheeks and benumbed their fingers and toes? They would soon be joining in some merry game, in a warm, cozy room, entirely forgetful of the winter night outside.

On one of the most beautiful avenues of the city was situated the residence of the wealthy merchant, Charles Welton. Never had the grand halls and drawing-room of the mansion been more cheerful and beautiful than on this Christmas night. Little Marguerite Welton was celebrating her 12th birthday and the crowd of boys and girls that she had invited to her party were making everything cheerful with their merry games and songs and happy laughter. Over in a corner of the great parlor sat Marguerite's father and mother, watching the children with interest. Very proud, indeed, were they of their little girl, who was the daintiest and prettiest among the group of richly dressed girls that thronged the room. Sunny, golden curls fell to her waist and her sweet, expressive blue eyes were shaded by long, curling lashes. Marguerite was never so happy as when making others happy, and tonight her dainty, slippered feet were merrily tripping from one group to another, intent upon seeing that everyone enjoyed a pleasant evening. After a delicious supper all gathered around the heavily-laden Christmas tree and Marguerite distributed the presents. All were delighted with their gifts and Marguerite sat apart from the rest in a large rocker near the window, enjoying their exclamations of surprise and delight. Soon there came a lull in the noisy merriment, and Marguerite, who was silent and thoughtful, suddenly heard a low, piteous moan outside. She lifted the silken curtain and peered out into the darkness. The moonlight fell upon the upturned countenance of a haggard-faced, shabbily-dressed tramp. She was a little frightened at first, but after obtaining a good view of him, she dropped the curtain and making some excuse, left the room.

In the hall she encountered one of the servants.

"Jane," she said, "there is a cold, hungry-looking tramp outside, and I want you to bring him into the dining-room."

Jane looked at her astonished.

"Why, Miss Marguerite, you know that your father has forbidden us to allow any stranger to enter the house unless he gives us permission."

Marguerite's sweet little face was pale, as she said firmly:

"Jane, this is my birthday and this morning papa said that I might use the house as I pleased today. I will open the door for the stranger myself."

She disappeared, and soon Jane heard heavy footsteps in the dining-room.

Marguerite placed a large arm chair near the cheerful warmth of the blazing fire for her guest, who, with a long-drawn sigh of relief, dropped into the chair and thanking her, fell asleep. Marguerite sat near him on a little stool, while he slept, and studied his features carefully. Not one of her many friends had ever dreamed of the deeply thoughtful, spiritual nature that she possessed. While she was closely observing her guest, there was a very serious expression in her blue eyes. He did not look like an ordinary tramp. His thick, black hair was neatly combed back from a broad, intelligent forehead and heavy lashes shaded eyes which Marguerite observed were a soft brown. His clothes, though patched and ragged, were clean. She could not help contrasting them with the elegant dress suits of her father.

When the stranger awoke Marguerite prepared a few nourishing refreshments for him, and while he satisfied his hunger she began to talk to him.

"What is your name?" she asked, timidly.

"Robert Taylor," he replied in a faint voice. "May I ask who my kind little helper is?"

"Marguerite Welton," she answered. "Were you always like this?"

"No, Miss Marguerite," he said, as tears filled his eyes, and in a few words he told her how, when a boy, the demon drink had entered his beautiful home and his father became a slave to the bottle. He was accidentally killed by an intoxicated bartender in a saloon and left his family in debt.

The stranger passed a rough, labor-worn hand across his eyes as he continued.

"As a result of the shock my sweet mother died and soon after, being unable to endure the privations of poverty, my little golden-haired sister left me, too. For a while an old friend of father's employed me, but I was not strong enough for the work, and left my native city. Since then I have been wandering from place to place, earning barely enough to keep me alive. Tonight I

was nearly frozen when I neared your house, and the bright lights from the windows looked so cheerful and reminded me so much of my old home I could not resist the temptation to come nearer the window and look in."

As he finished a tear rolled down his cheek and Marguerite said gently: "I'm glad that you came here. Christmas is the time for us to help the unfortunate and I want to help you."

She laid her little hand on his shoulder, as she said in sweet, sympathetic tones:

"I know how lonely you must feel tonight and I can feel what anguish and despair you have suffered, with not a friend to cheer you. Sometimes when I glance around me and see the luxury that I enjoy, I realize how unworthy I am of it all and an intense longing comes over me to do something for the unfortunate and the destitute."

At this moment the door opened and Mr. Welton entered. Imagine his astonishment when he saw his little girl standing with tearful eyes, like a piteous, guardian angel near the stranger, who was bowing his head in his hands. Mr. Welton broke the silence by saying sternly:

"Marguerite, is this the way you treat your guests? Believing that you were tired and needed rest, your companions excused themselves and went home. I did not expect to find you entertaining a tramp."

Marguerite turned to her father with an earnest, pleading look.

"Don't, papa. This man was cold and hungry, and as this is Christmas night I wanted to help him. He has been talking to me and I forgot about my party. I know that he must be a good man, but has had many misfortunes, and, papa, won't you please do something for him?"

The proud merchant glanced haughtily at the stranger and offering him a gold coin, said:

"Take this and go."

The stranger stood up to his full height as he said with dignity:

"I am no beggar and I will not accept your charity. Your little girl has been kind to me tonight and I thank her. Before I go I wish to ask you if you can give me any employment."

"No," Mr. Welton answered, as he turned to speak to Marguerite, but she had disappeared.

Robert Taylor was descending the long flight of steps from the veranda, when a little figure in white suddenly appeared before him.

"Take this," said Marguerite in a low tone, pressing a purse into his hand. "It may help you. Do not think unkindly of papa. He gives large sums to charity, but does not like to have tramps and beggars come to his house."

"God bless you, little Marguerite. I believe that the angels will record your good deed tonight, for Christ has said, 'Inasmuch as ye have done it unto the least of these, my brethren, ye have done it unto me.' Remember, little girl, that if the day ever comes when I can in any way help you or one of your family it shall be the proudest day of my life."

She bent over and kissed him on the forehead, and as he turned the corner the last thing that he saw was the moonlight falling upon the slender, delicate form of little Marguerite.

CHAPTER II—TEN YEARS LATER.

Again it is Christmas, but the scene changes to a prosperous, growing town, some distance from the scene of the last chapter. In one part of the town, where most of the business men dwell, was situated the pretty little cottage of Robert Taylor, owner of a large manufacturing establishment, and one of the most honored and respected citizens of the little town. Mr. Taylor believed that his happiness might be complete, if he only had a suitable partner to assist him in his business.

In the cozy parlor of his home, on this Christmas night, he was enjoying a delightful evening with his wife and little girl.

"Come, Helen," he said, "we must have another song."

Little Helen, who possessed her father's dark hair and brown eyes, and her mother's sweet voice, began her father's favorite song, "Home, Sweet Home." Her mother accompanied her on the piano, and she was singing the words, "An exile from home," when a knock was heard at the back door.

Mr. Taylor left his easy, comfortable rocker and telling Helen to finish the song, went into the adjoining room and opened the door. A tall, middle-aged man, plainly but neatly attired, was standing outside.

"Would you kindly tell me where I could find shelter for the night? I am a stranger here."

"I'm afraid that you will not find it easy to get a room tonight," said Mr. Taylor. "However, I have a spare room which you may use. Come in and warm yourself."

"Thank you," said the stranger, as he stepped into the little dining-room and seated himself.

Mr. Taylor believed that at some time, he could not remember when or where, he had heard that same deep, strong voice and seen those flashing, dark blue eyes. As the bright firelight fell upon the face of the stranger he noted deep lines of care in the broad forehead and becoming curious to know who his guest was, Mr. Taylor entered into a conversation with him.

An hour later, when Mrs. Taylor entered the dining-room, her husband said to her:

"Rose, let me introduce you to Mr. Charles Welton, my new partner in business."

Then he gave her a brief account of the events of that Christmas night, ten years before, when as a homeless wanderer he had visited Mr. Welton's home.

"Rose," said Mr. Taylor, "I promised little Marguerite that night that if the opportunity ever came I would be glad to help her or one of her family. Now, her once wealthy father is homeless and penniless himself, and I want to help him. Marguerite is dead now, but I hope that she knows I am keeping my promise."

The slumbers of the two friends that Christmas night were attended by the most beautiful dreams, in which sweet little Marguerite appeared to them as an angel, saying: "Peace on earth, good will to men."